

‘Essential Assistance’ versus ‘Concerted Cultivation’: Theorising Class-Based Patterns of Parenting in Britain

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Abstract

The family is recognised by academics as a key site for the (re)production of class inequalities in several contexts, with parenting being subject to increasing scrutiny and research. Much of the research hitherto has been primarily deductive in nature – academics have tended to test and explore existing theories and the significance of particular family processes and parenting variables. This article presents a grounded theory of class-specific patterns of parenting in relation to children’s education and leisure, which was produced on the basis of 90 interviews with a case study of families from a small city in the north-west of England. Two main social classes formed the case study – a poor-working-class and a middle-class divided into three fractions. The parents from the poor-working-class and middle-class families had distinct mentalities and practices that marked two patterns of parenting, conceptualised as ‘essential assistance’ and ‘concerted cultivation’ (the latter coined by Lareau (2003)) respectively.

Keywords

concerted cultivation, essential assistance, grounded theory, parenting, social class

Introduction

During the last two decades social class has been restored to its rightful position in academia. Amid escalating class inequalities there has been something of a resurgence of interest among sociologists (Gillies, 2005). Evidence has come to light that the rich are getting richer and the poor are getting poorer with little change in rates of social mobility, which are fairly low in Britain (Blanden and Machin, 2008; Reich, 2008). Efforts to explain the production and reproduction of class inequalities have thus been redoubled, and the changing class structure and associated patterns in relation to the daily lives and life-chances of members of the emerging classes have been a central point of interest (see Devine, 2004; Evans, 2007; Vincent and Ball, 2006). It has been found that the developments in society implicated in a demise of class and rise of individualisation (including globalisation, 'de-industrialisation' and new technologies) have actually led to a polarisation in class inequality, and fragmentation of traditional middle and working classes into more segmented forms (Savage et al., 2013). Class-related stratification has not been eradicated, then, but become more problematic.

The polarisation and fragmentation seems to be largely a consequence of the growth of middle-class and disappearance of working-class occupations in British 'post-modern' society. More service-sector and supervisory positions have been created due to a boom in the leisure industry and burgeoning workforce (Roberts, 2001). At the same time, there have been less manufacturing and other labour intensive positions due to them being replaced by new technologies and moved off-shore (Evans, 2007; Reich, 2008; Roberts, 2001). Members of the middle-class have transitioned into new positions fairly straightforwardly, notwithstanding the fact that there is now 'more competition to get in, then to get on' (Roberts, 2001, p.168). However, as Walkerdine, Lucey and Melody (2001) have shown, many members of the working-class have struggled or been unable to 'reinvent' themselves in this new labour market. Not only that, members of the working-class have been found to be disadvantaged in the recently emerged meritocratic education system (Gillies, 2005; Reay, 2006). The members of the working-class who have struggled or been unable to transition are now 'stuck' at the bottom of the social hierarchy and are suggested to have formed a 'poor' fraction of a disorganised working-class

(Roberts, 2001). Unable to find work, many have become dependent on state benefits and experience multiple forms of deprivation.

The redoubled efforts to explain the production and reproduction of social advantage and disadvantage have stimulated lively debate, though one thing does seem to be clear: to explain class inequalities and do something about them through policy, researchers and governments must look to the family for at least some (if not a great many) of the answers (Ball, 2010). Recent longitudinal and biographical research has been particularly revealing in this regard. It has been observed in several studies that class inequalities in educational attainment emerge in early life (even before primary schooling begins) and widen during childhood (Feinstein, 2003; Goodman, Gregg and Washbrook, 2011). There is also considerable evidence that class inequalities in sports and arts participation are established during childhood and maintained into adulthood (Birchwood, Roberts and Pollock, 2008; Nagel, Ganzeboom, Haanstra and Oud, 1997). This points to the significance of factors beyond the school, which has traditionally been turned to for explanations and interventions.

The family has been a point of interest for academics in a variety of research fields. Both quantitative and qualitative studies have illuminated family level ‘variables’ and process that might explain the production and reproduction of class inequalities in a variety of contexts, but there are associated limitations and good deal of discrepancy in the findings generated. As Irwin (2009, p.1125) has noted, quantitative research generally ‘leaves micro level interactions as a black box’, while qualitative research ‘explores particular compartments within the black box’. Different research approaches notwithstanding, it seems that parents from certain social classes are better able and more inclined to get involved with and invest in their children. A number of studies have revealed different resources, aspirations, strategies and practices among parents in Britain (Ball, 2003; Devine, 2004; Gillies, 2007; Irwin and Elley, 2011; Reay, 2004; Walkerdine et al., 2001); indeed, there is a wealth of insightful and quality research on the topic area, much of it from prominent academics in the field of education. However, few go so far as to amalgamate their findings into specific *patterns* of parenting according to different social groupings. A notable exception is the study conducted by Annette Lareau with families in North America. Though a very small study (only 12 families were involved), it caused something of

a stir among academics researching in the area. In-depth observations and interviews with poor-working-class and middle-class families revealed different ‘cultural logics of child-rearing’, which Lareau (2003) conceptualised as ‘natural growth’ and ‘concerted cultivation’ respectively.

Lareau (2003) found that social class impacted on three main areas of family life – language use, interactions with social institutions, and the organisation of daily life – which clustered together to form ‘meaningful patterns’. The poor-working class parents in Lareau’s (2003) study who adhered to the cultural logic of natural growth presumed that their children would spontaneously grow and thrive. Limited finances made it a major life task for the parents to ensure that the basic needs of their children (food, clothing, shelter) were met. The parents tended to use directives with their children and had little involvement in their education. Indeed, the children were given a high degree of autonomy over their schooling and lives more generally. The working-class children had little structure to their free time, and spent most of it playing with siblings and friends. Conversely, the middle-class parents in Lareau’s (2003) study who adhered to the cultural logic of concerted cultivation were found to invest considerably in many aspects of their children’s lives. The parents believed that they had a right and responsibility to ensure the best for their children in the education system and beyond. They engaged in a lot of discussion with their children and closely supervised their progress at school and how they spent their leisure time. Organised activities that were ‘established and controlled’ by their parents dominated the lives of the middle-class children.

Lareau’s (2003) cultural logics of child-rearing have since been verified and explored further by a number of academics in a variety of countries and have received some support (Bodovski, 2010; Cheadle, 2008; Henderson, 2013; Irwin and Elley, 2011; Levine-Rasky, 2009; Perrier, 2012; Redford, Johnson and Honnold, 2009). Studies in Britain have perhaps cast the most doubt on Lareau’s (2003) claims. Henderson (2013) used data from the Longitudinal Study of Young People in England in an attempt to quantitatively ‘test’ the legitimacy of concerted cultivation. While she did observe the positive impact of the parenting culture on young people’s educational attainment, she did not find a strong relationship between it and social class; language use and interactions with social institutions did not vary by social class, only the organisation of daily life did. By contrast, in qualitative studies

undertaken in Britain support has been provided for concerted cultivation as a benchmark for ‘good’ middle-class parenting, but it has also been observed that there is considerable intra-class diversity with some parents more concertedly cultivating than others (Irwin and Elley, 2011; Perrier, 2012). Interestingly, less attention has been afforded by academics to the working-class parenting culture of natural growth, though British literature does provide evidence for aspects of the culture, such as limited interactions between parents from deprived backgrounds and their children’s schools (Crozier, 1997, 1998, 1999; Reay, 2001).

Before moving on to the nature and purpose of the present article it is worth mentioning that parenting cultures and ideologies are socially constructed and change over time (Chambers, 2012). Indeed, Lareau (2003) noted the importance of situating the cultural logics of child-rearing that she observed in her study in their historical context. There is evidence of increasing investment by middle-class parents in their children’s cognitive and physical abilities in recent years, which have been referred to as the ‘scholarisation’ (Cambridge Primary Review, 2010) and ‘corporealisation’ (Evans and Davies, 2010) of childhood. Middle-class parents appear to be investing in their children earlier, more heavily and diversely, and for a longer period of time (Furstenberg, 2010; Gauthier, Smeeding and Furstenberg, 2004; Vincent and Ball, 2007). As well as in Lareau’s research, these changes in middle-class parenting cultures and ideologies have been captured in academics discussions of ‘intensive’, ‘professional’ and ‘tiger’ mothering (Chua, 2011; Guo, 2013; Hayes, 1996; Vincent and Ball, 2006), ‘involved’ fathering (Gillies, 2009; Gottzén, 2011), and ‘helicopter’ parenting (LeMoyne and Buchanan, 2011).

Given the limited literature that focuses on whole patterns of parenting as well as the notable changes in social class and British family life since the 1970s, it is my contention that the study of contemporary class-related parenting cultures is perhaps especially welcome at this point in time. Moreover, that it is important to undertake research that seeks to generate new insights and theories in view of the many studies verifying parenting cultures originally conceptualised in specific regions and nations. In this article I present a grounded theory of class-specific patterns of parenting in relation to children’s education and leisure in Britain, with a view to contributing in a modest way to the research outlined above.

The Study

Charmaz's (2006) constructivist grounded theory was used to guide the study on which this article is based. It was used from the first instance as a 'total methodology' (Weed, 2009) in order to produce a substantive theory regarding class-specific patterns of parenting in relation to children's education and leisure. Figure 1 provides a summary of how the grounded theory process translated into practice in the study. The data for the study were generated via 90 semi-structured interviews with parents and children from 62 families living in and around a small city in the north-west of England. The recruitment and characteristics of these families along with details of their interviews are outlined below.

Recruitment of the Families

The families were recruited through 12 primary schools, 11 state and one independent, located within a three-mile radius of the city centre. More specifically, a table detailing certain characteristics (number of pupils eligible for free school meals; number of pupils with special educational needs; Key Stage 2 exam results; Office for Standards in Education/Independent Schools Inspectorate report information; and Indices of Multiple Deprivation for the schools' catchment areas) was compiled for all of the schools within the pre-determined radius of the city centre in question, then the schools that would be likely to yield particular types of families were contacted. The schools willing to assist with the project distributed information packs to Year 5 and 6 pupils (nine to 11 years old) to be taken home to their parents. The information packs contained an outline of the project along with a Family Information Questionnaire (FIQ) that requested basic demographic information. The families willing to take part in the project were asked to fill in the FIQ and return it to their child's school. The returned FIQs were collected and the contact details used to schedule interviews with the families. This process was undertaken three times during the school year in which the data was collected with a different four schools each time. This was so that a grounded theory could be built based upon emerging themes and gaps in the findings and demographic of families. Theoretical saturation was reached after the third recruitment.

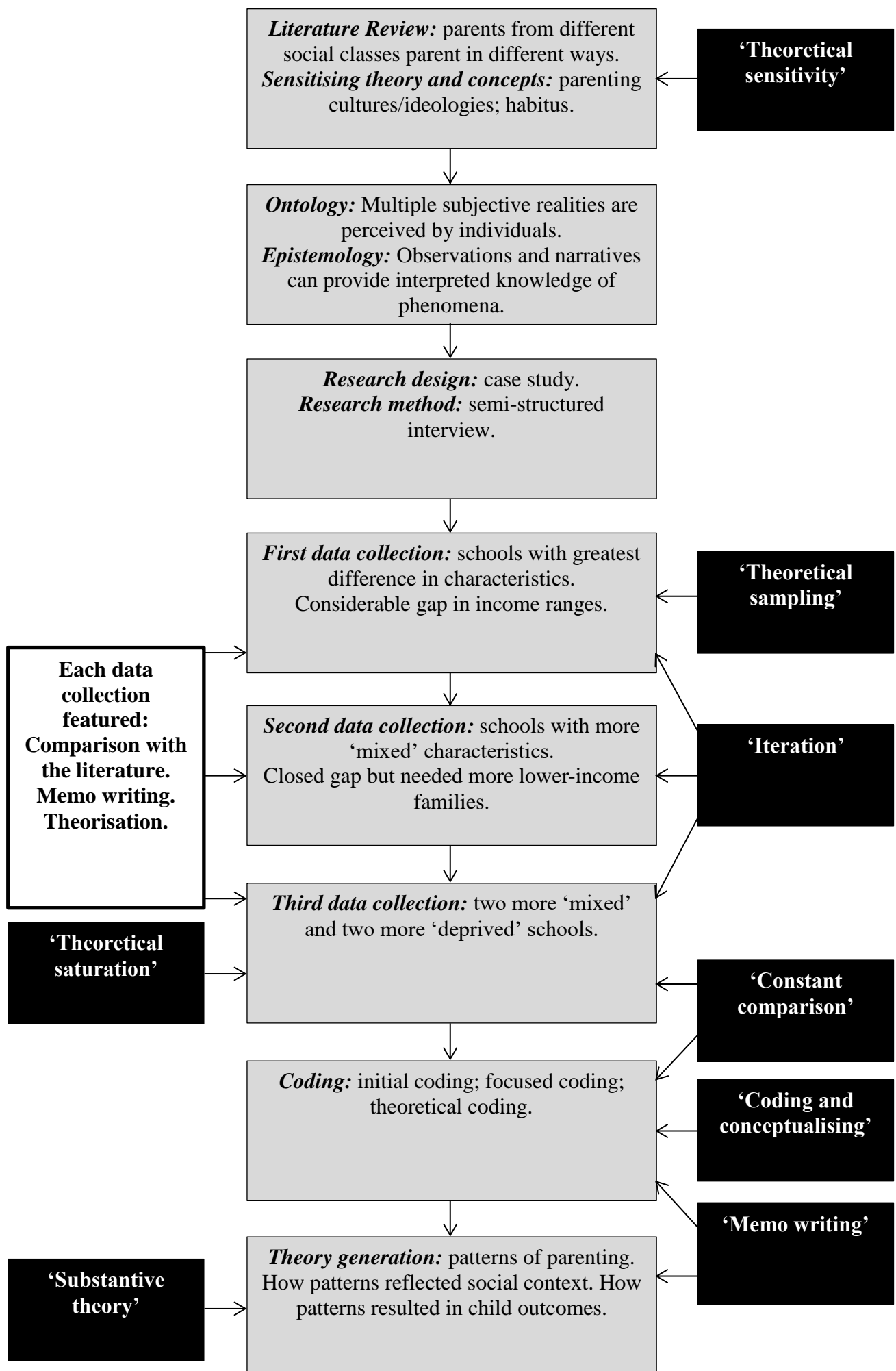


Figure 1. Summary of how the grounded theory process translated into practice in the study

Characteristics of the Families

The recruitment process resulted in a diverse sample of families that reflected the demographics of the research location – the city from which the families were recruited has a strong middle-class demographic according to local statistics, along with two prominent areas of deprivation. Consequently, differences in socio-economic and family characteristics marked two distinct social classes – a tentatively described ‘poor-working-class’¹ and a broad middle-class consisting of three ‘fractions’. The specific numbers were as follows: 14 of the families were deemed to be poor-working-class (PWC), 11 to be lower-middle-class (LMC), 21 to be mid-middle-class (MMC), and 16 to be upper-middle-class (UMC).

In relation to socio-economic characteristics, the incomes of the families ranged from less than £10,000 to £180,000. The poor-working-class families’ annual incomes were around £10,000 or just over or under, while all of the middle-class families were over £20,000. The specific breakdown of the ranges and how they generally related to social class is illustrated in Table 1. There were variations in employment status and occupation according to social class. Most of the poor-working-class mothers and fathers were unemployed. Those who were employed tended to work part-time in lower level occupations. Of the 48 middle-class mothers, 11 were housewives, 27 worked part-time and 10 full-time. All of the middle-class fathers worked full-time. Notwithstanding some gender differences, the upper-middle-class parents were generally company directors or managers or employed in professional occupations, while there was a greater variety in the types of occupations the mid- and lower-middle-class parents’ were employed. There were important differences in the parents’ levels of education according to social class. The majority of the poor-working-class parents were educated to secondary school level, and a few had also gone on to further education. The majority of the middle-class parents had undertaken some form of tertiary level qualification – 34 of the mothers and 29 of the fathers had a degree.

Table 1. Income ranges of the families and relationship to social class

Income (£)	Number of Families	Total	Social Class
< 10,000	7	14	Poor-working-class
10,000 – 19,000	7		
20,000 – 29,000	5	10	Lower-middle-class
30,000 – 39,000	5		
40,000 – 49,000	5	22	Mid-middle-class
50,000 – 59,000	5		
60,000 – 69,000	4		
70,000 – 79,000	4		
80,000 – 89,000	4		
90,000 – 99,000	3	16	Upper-middle-class
100,000 – 109,000	3		
110,000 – 119,000	1		
120,000 – 129,000	3		
130,000 – 139,000	1		
140,000 – 149,000	1		
150,000 – 159,000	0		
160,000 – 169,000	2		
170,000 – 179,000	2		
<i>Total</i>	<i>62</i>	<i>62</i>	

Some of the notable variations in family characteristics according to social class were as follows. Among the 14 poor-working-class families, there were eight two-biological-parent families and six single-parent families. Many of the parents had several children, often born years apart. The mothers ranged in age from 29 to 53 and the fathers from 26 to 55. One of the families was Polish, but the others were all White British. Of the 48 middle-class families, 41 were headed by two biological parents, four by a biological mother and step-father, and three by a single-mother. The majority of the parents had two children (30), though there were a number who had one child (7) or three or more children (11). The mothers ranged in age from 33 to 55 and the fathers from 37 to 66. Virtually all of the parents were White British, only five (three mothers and two fathers) were Asian.

Interviews with the Families

Semi-structured interviews were selected as the research tool for the study as they are a useful means to explore social processes and dynamics at work within families. The interviews were conducted in

the families' homes and where applicable and possible, two parents and the Year 5 or 6 'target' child were interviewed. There were several instances where only the mother was interviewed as the father and/or child were not available or willing to be interviewed, which is not an uncommon scenario in research involving families (for example, see: Devine, 2004; Vincent and Ball, 2006). The parents' interviews lasted between one and three hours and the children's interviews approximately 15 minutes. All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim by a professional typist. The transcripts were analysed on a weekly basis during the course of the study using NVivo software to manage and explore the data, which were coded in three main phases as described in Charmaz (2006).

The interviews had three central foci: (1) the ways in which the parents' were involved in their children's education and extra-curricular and leisure-time organised activities; (2) the factors that shaped the parents' involvement; and (3) the generational changes in the parents' involvement. The issue of parental involvement was approached biographically and holistically, in that the interview guide was designed to progress from pre-school to the end of primary school and the interview questions were generally open-ended to allow the interviewees to provide direction to their interviews. In order to discuss parental involvement a detailed account of the children's education and leisure lives was first obtained. Thus, the data from the study is highly suited to exploring parenting aspirations, strategies and practices and if there are any meaningful ways in which they cluster together according to social class.

Findings

There were considerable differences in patterns of parenting between the poor-working-class and middle-class families, as well as some subtle differences according to middle-class fraction. The primary areas of family life that social class impacted were: the priorities, barriers and resources the parents had in relation to the parenting of their children; the parents' belief systems, including whether they thought they could influence their children's lives and the degree to which they thought about their children's futures; the parents' relationships with social institutions; the degree to and ways in which the parents were involved in their children's lives and managed and monitored their children's

behaviour; the pace and structure of the families' daily lives; and the families ties to their local area. The findings in relation to each of these areas are presented below.

Priorities

The poor-working-class and middle-class parents had different priorities in relation to the parenting of their children. When the poor-working-class parents 'opened up' and directed the topic of conversation they often talked about issues beyond the primary focus of the study (education and leisure), such as their own and their children health, their children's learning or behavioural problems, and issues on their housing estates (such as drink, drugs, swearing and the lack of entertainment for children). For example, one mother said the following:

There's always kids hanging round the streets ... the area, like here you've got drugs there, you've got drugs there, you've got drugs there (pointing to houses around the street), surrounded by it. But I'm very anti-drugs and my kids know the dangers of drugs ... we just don't mix with them at all ... she's got two boys the same age as mine and the language that comes from them, the way they talk to their mother, no respect ... I wish I could move, really do (Mother, PWC).

Indeed, the majority of the parents did not have a great deal to say regarding their children's education and organised activities or their involvement in them. By contrast, for the middle-class parents it was clear that their children's education, though not the 'be all and end all' as some of the parents remarked, was extremely important. The children's organised activities also formed a crucial aspect of the middle-class families' lives. Consequently, a striking theme in the middle-class parents' narratives that was regarded as something of a priority was 'balance'. There were many references to balance in several different contexts. For example, the parents talked about their children having a balanced education, balancing the time demands of their children's education and organised activities, striking a balance between their children's active and inactive leisure, raising balanced children, having a balanced parenting style, teaching their children to be balanced, balancing their paid work and family demands, and maintaining a balance between protecting their children and affording them independence.

Barriers

The poor-working-class and middle-class parents had different ‘barriers’ to their parenting – things that prevented them from parenting in the ways they would have if they were not there. The narratives revealed multiple forms of deprivation among the poor-working-class families, including those related to income, health and living environment. These parents had more ‘physical’ barriers to their parenting; for example, they lacked a number of ‘tools’ that the middle-class parents had, such as internet access, a car and disposable income to pay for things such as educational tuition and organised activities. Conversely, the things that hindered the middle-class parents were primarily related to busyness and parenting culture. The middle-class families often had a lot to fit into a typical week due to the parents’ paid work and children’s organised activity schedules, which sometimes left them feeling hurried and harried. Some of the middle-class parents also felt constrained to parent in particular ways and let their children do or not do things because of peer pressure in their social networks, as one mother highlighted thus:

Peer pressure, it’s huge ... the way their peers are being brought up and what they’re allowed to do does make me allow them to do things that I don’t think are the best thing really. At the end of Year 6 ... loads of the mums organise a leaving thing for them which involves stretch limos and going to Frankie and Benny’s for a meal. I think it’s absurd ... I would rather they didn’t go but I’ve paid out for [son], I’m not going to stop him going and being the only kid left ... you don’t want to alienate your children from their peers. (Mother, LMC)

Resources

The middle-class parents had more parenting resources than the poor-working-class parents. While there was diversity in economic resources among the middle-class families, their degree of wealth and material comfort was considerably higher than the poor-working-class families. Economic resources were extremely limited among the poor-working-class families and seriously restricted what the parents and children could do. Educational leisure activities, for example, were out of the question:

Money's tight isn't it and you can't always do what you want to do with your kids ... I mean if we go to the zoo, you're talking a £100 before you start, you know, for a family to get into the zoo ... then you've got your dinner on top of that and your bus fares ... it's very educational, it's just affording to go. (Mother, PWC)

The middle-class parents who had little disposable income generally had ways to get the most out of their tight budgets to prevent it from impacting on their children's lives. This was particularly evident in relation to funding their children's organised activities, as some parents would make personal sacrifices – such as 'changing the car less often' or 'waiting to have a new carpet' – or provide their children with choices within particular limits ('I would like the ability to say, "what would you like to do?" but I can't, I can just say, "there's the choice"' – Mother, LMC). As well as economic resources, there was evidence that the middle-class families had more social and cultural resources. The middle-class families tended to have large and diverse social networks, while the poor-working-class families' social networks were often limited to extended family members and neighbours. In addition, the middle-class parents were generally educated to a higher level and, though their autonomous leisure was somewhat limited, it was clear from their accounts of their individual interests and family activities that they enjoyed a greater breadth of cultural activities across high-, middle- and low-brow genres than the poor-working-class parents.

Beliefs regarding parental influence

The middle-class parents perceived that they had a significant influence over their children's lives while the poor-working-class parents did not. This was illustrated via differences in the parents' confidence in their parenting, the degree of responsibility they assumed for their children's education, and their views in relation to their children's ability. A number of the poor-working-class parents appeared quite nervous and unsure in their parenting. For example, some would look for reassurance during their interviews, saying things like 'is that okay?' after their responses. The poor-working-class parents placed the onus for their children's learning and achievement on their children and their children's schools. If a child was unable to read or write, for example, it was blamed on the child not being very

bright or motivated ('As long as [son] comes out of school reading and writing, telling the time, ... I know he's never going to be brains of Britain' – Mother, PWC) or the child's school not doing enough for them. By contrast, though the middle-class parents were reflective in the sense that they often assessed and evaluated their parenting and were questioning and thoughtful before trying new things, they generally came across in their interviews as assured in their parenting. The middle-class parents took responsibility for their children's learning and achievement. They treated their children's educational activities (such as homework, reading and revision) as a 'we' issues ('I expect them to do their homework but I participate very much in it' – Mother, UMC), and viewed their children's educational progress as resulting from their investment as well as the hard work of their children. In this regard, it was clear that the poor-working-class parents emphasised 'nature' and the middle-class parents 'nurture'.

Thoughts about the future

The poor-working-class parents were very present-centred in their approach to parenting while the middle-class parents thought in both the short- and long-term. One example of this is the poor-working-class and middle-class parents' aspirations in relations to their children's education and leisure. There was little evidence that the poor-working-class parents gave their children's education and leisure futures a great deal of thought, as they talked about simply wanting their children to 'carry on as they were'. The middle-class parents, by contrast, were clearly very forward-thinking and knew what they wanted their children to achieve:

I'm fairly forward-thinking for them, I'd like to say I'm one step ahead seeing what's coming and how I can prepare the way ... I wouldn't like to arrive upon a problem and it be too late to do anything about it ... I've got it mapped out to 18 now. (Mother, UMC)

Another example is the poor-working-class and middle-class parents' propensities to 'push' their children. The poor-working-class parents did not make their children do any educational or organised activities that they did not want to do. As long as their children tried their best and were happy at school and spent their time in harmless ways outside school, the poor-working-class parents were generally

content to 'let them be' and address any issues as and when they cropped up. Conversely, the middle-class parents pushed their children to do basic (such as homework) and additional (such as tutors) educational activities and have active and varied leisure lives. They wanted to invest early in order to secure the best possible futures for their children. If their children were resistant (and some were), the parents employed particular parenting practices to ensure they were compliant to their wishes and (hopefully) bring them around to their way of thinking. Thus, it was acceptable to the middle-class parents to make their children unhappy in the short-term if it would bring about benefits in the long-term. This is not to say that they found it easy to do so – a central dilemma for the middle-class parents was how much to push their children:

I agonise about this constantly, do I want them to be happy? Do I want them to achieve? It's a really complicated one, because I do want them to be happy and, ultimately, their choice is their choice, but I am aspirational for them, I think it's a very scary world out there and I think unless you achieve, you're left with very little choice in this life. (Mother, UMC)

Relationships with social institutions

The poor-working-class parents' relationships with their children's schools were generally characterised by a lack of trust and degree of antagonism. There was an 'us' and 'them' relationship between a number of the parents and their children's teachers, and some of the parents questioned what went on in their children's schools that they did not see:

I was constantly being phoned up for minor little things ... I could tell that the head-teacher just didn't like him ... there was a lot of conflict going on in the end with myself and the teachers, the head-teacher particularly ... when I went in to see her, she really shouted at him in front of me ... I thought, "God, I don't even shout at him like that, what are you doing?" and I found it really quite disturbing. (Mother, PWC).

It was also evident that there was a 'gap' between the children's home and school lives; the poor-working-class children (and their parents) viewed school as for 'work' and home as for 'play'. It is likely that the poor-working-class parents had a similar relationship with other social institutions. When

I went to interview the poor-working-class parents many of them seemed to be quite suspicious of me and what I was doing at first. There were also a number of comments made by the parents suggesting an ‘us’ and ‘them’ perspective in relation to health institutions and the government. They felt that they were often told how to parent by these institutions, and resented it:

I don’t think anyone should tell you how to bring up your children ... I think it’s down to you and it’s up to you to parent your children, not the government, not do-gooders, not teachers, it’s up to you. (Mother, PWC)

By contrast, the middle-class parents appeared to have a positive relationship with these social institutions. A number of them were actually teachers and health professionals themselves. There was evidence that the middle-class parents tried to work alongside their children’s schools in the education of their children, and believed that their children’s teachers were on the same wavelength as themselves:

Our relationship with the school is very good, in terms of we’ve always kind of worked closely with the school and felt committed to what the school’s trying to achieve really (Father, LMC).

There appeared to be less of a ‘gap’ between home and school life for the middle-class children than the poor-working-class children. There were rules and routine in both environments, and educational activities and learning were not confined to school. Furthermore, much of the middle-class children’s time was spent in adult-supervised environments outside as well as inside school.

Involvement in children’s lives

The middle-class parents were far more involved in their children’s education and leisure lives than the poor-working-class parents. As encapsulated in the following extract, the poor-working-class parents allowed their children a high degree of autonomy over their lives:

I’ve let [son] pretty much choose what he wants to do when he wants to do it, within reason, I mean I wouldn’t let him go outside and like punch somebody ... but when it comes to making personal choices I let him make his own. (Mother, PWC)

There was little evidence of the poor-working-class parents' intervening in their children's education or leisure lives. They 'tried' to assist with their children's homework and restrict when their children played out, but if their children were resistant they were unlikely to persevere ('I try to but ... we tend to fall out really (laughs) ... he likes to do it on his own so, I do try' – Mother, PWC). Generally, it seemed that the poor-working-class parents were involved in their children's lives when and where necessary to keep their children up with their peers and out of trouble. Conversely, the middle-class parents believed that they had a right and responsibility to intervene, and exercised this right and responsibility on a regular basis. There was evidence of the middle-class parents being involved in their children's education and leisure through various parenting strategies and practices (chartered in detail in Wheeler (2017)). Their strategic involvement is particularly noteworthy, as it was not evident among the poor-working-class families. Not only did the middle-class parents know where they wanted their children to go, they had a plan as to how to lead them there. Key strategies of the parents included getting their children in good schools and good positions within schools, 'pushing' their children to progress, and establishing good educational habits in the children from a young age. Also worth mentioning is the finding that the middle-class parents persevered in their strategies and practices, through tears and tantrums in some cases:

Sometimes homework can be rushed, [so] we have to go back and do it, and it's done on a very calm, "Right we need to start again, that's not good enough, that's not neat enough", and yes there are tears, yes there are tantrums, but we get there in the end. (Mother, LMC)

Managing and monitoring children's behaviour

The degree to, and ways in which, the poor-working-class and middle-class parents managed and monitored their children's behaviour varied. The poor-working-class parents imposed few rules and limitations in their households. Most described their parenting style as 'laid-back':

I'm pretty laidback really ... they're not bad kids, you know what I mean? As long as they don't bring me any grief ... as long as they're happy, really, I'm not too bothered. But if I do, you know, say do something and I mean it they will do it. (Mother, PWC)

There was evidence that certain behaviours were a concern to the poor-working-class parents, particularly respect and honesty. They did not like being talked back to and lied to by their children and some of the parents also mentioned that they would not tolerate swearing in-front of them. The poor-working-class parents tended to manage their children's behaviour through praise and punishment. In addition, as indicated in the previous extract, the parents would use directives to get their children to do or not do things. With regard to monitoring their children's behaviour, there was little evidence that the parents actively did so; they seemed to rely on information from their children's schools, family members and neighbours. Conversely, in the middle-class households it was clear that the parents imposed many rules and limitations and monitored many aspects of their children's lives. The following aspects of the children's lives were especially subject to rules, limitations and monitoring by their parents: progress at school, participation in physical activity, television and internet viewing, screen and console use, diet, manners, and treatment of others. There was evidence of different degrees of strictness among the middle-class families and according to gender. When asked to describe their parenting style the parents often used the phrase 'firm but fair' as well as the terms 'consistent', 'loving' and 'fun', but it was often the case that one of the parents would assume the role of disciplinarian to a greater degree than the other. The primary way in which the middle-class parents managed and monitored their children's behaviour was discussion:

We've always encouraged both of ours to talk to us about things no matter what ... and if they disagree with us to say and to tell us what they're thinking really. Both of us have always tried to encourage them to talk things out rather than shout and scream and storm off. (Father, LMC)

It is worth noting that there was evidence that social class impacted upon language use among the families. The phrases used, detail offered, and ability to articulate by the poor-working-class and middle-class parents and children often differed considerably, with the generally higher levels of education among the middle-class families showing quite overtly.

Pace and structure of daily life

The middle-class families seemed to live busier and more structured lives than their poor-working-class counterparts. The middle-class families often had a lot to fit into a typical week. The children did at least two organised activities, and usually had homework, other educational activities, birthday parties, and other social events as well. The parents had paid work and housework duties to fulfil, family time to organise, and their children's leisure to facilitate. Thus, busyness was repeatedly mentioned by the parents ('It just always seems to be busy, there's always something on or you have to be somewhere' – Mother, MC) and, interestingly, it was observed to be an indicator in some cases of 'good' parenting in the sense that it demonstrated that they were investing in their children:

I think there is a lot of peer pressure, you think, "well, someone else's kids are doing that so that might make them better than mine" ... I don't think that but maybe that's where a lot of the mentality comes from, that everyone seems to want to be busy all the time. (Mother, UMC)

By contrast, while some of the poor-working-class parents reported feeling harried, their lives were generally more relaxed. The children did not have heavy education or leisure schedules and the parents were often unemployed or only worked part-time. To highlight this point, when scheduling interviews with the families for the study the poor-working-class parents were likely to say 'come around tomorrow', while the middle-class parents had to be 'booked' for a specific time and date, which was often a couple of weeks away.

Ties to local area

The final area of family life that social class impacted was the families' ties to their local area. The poor-working-class families' lives were highly localised while the middle-class families' lives were not. The poor-working-class children went to their local primary and secondary schools, often the same ones that their parents went to. Their leisure lives also tended to revolve around the areas that they lived. Indeed, what came across strongly in the poor-working-class parents' interviews were their feelings of spatial as well as social segregation, with many of their comments beginning with 'on this estate' or 'round here'. Conversely, the middle-class children did not necessarily go to their local primary or secondary schools and not all of their leisure was close to home. The middle-class families also often

had to travel to visit extended family members as the parents had moved away from the areas that they grew up.

Discussion

All-in-all, the findings revealed two class-specific patterns of parenting, which are broadly similar to those identified in the ethnographic study by Lareau (2003). As noted earlier, Lareau (2003) observed two distinct cultural logics of child-rearing among poor-working-class and middle-class parents, which she conceptualised 'natural growth' and 'concerted cultivation' respectively. Corresponding findings in relation to the 'content' of these cultural logics of child-rearing were observed in the present study. The social class differences in interactions with social institutions and the organisation of daily life were nearly identical. The variations in language use were also similar but less 'visible'. It is likely that the ethnographic methods used in Lareau's (2003) study were more sensitive to social class differences in language use than the semi-structured interview used in this study. However, the semi-structured interview seemed to have some advantages over ethnography as more areas of family life that social class impacted became apparent.

In terms of the conceptualisation of the patterns of parenting, concerted cultivation was the perfect fit for the middle-class. It conveys the forward-thinking and deliberate nature of the parents' involvement. Also, the meticulous lengths to which the parents went – every aspect of their children's development was open to pruning. The middle-class parents were involved in their children's education and leisure in similar ways, but to different degrees. The upper-middle-class parents tended to have more intensive and regular involvement than the mid-middle-class, and the mid more than the lower. Thus, concerted cultivation can be regarded as gradational. With regard to the conceptualisation of the pattern of parenting for the poor-working-class, 'essential assistance' rather than natural growth is used in this study. It conveys the necessary and basic involvement of the parents more adequately than natural growth; the poor-working-class parents did what they needed to do in order to keep their children 'up' with their peers and out of trouble and intervened only when their children went 'off track' or asked for help. It is readily apparent why Lareau (2003) used natural growth – the limited involvement by the

poor-working-class parents meant that their children had more autonomy over their lives. However, it does not follow that children from deprived backgrounds are left to grow ‘naturally’. In addition, the parents in the present study did not express any desires in relation to the ‘natural’ development of their children. In fact, they did not think a great deal about the future at all, they simply did what they could within the constraints that they were confronted on a daily basis. Thus, essential assistance is used instead of natural growth because it more adequately captures the mentality and practices of the poor-working-class parents.

These patterns of parenting have implications for the production of class inequalities in education and leisure. Lareau (2003) suggested that the different cultural logics of child-rearing observed in her study transferred different advantages to children. She observed that poor-working-class and middle-class children in her study were afforded different skills and ‘senses’. For example, the former were taught to be submissive to authority figures and found to develop a ‘sense of constraint’, while the latter were taught to be authoritative themselves and found to develop a ‘sense of entitlement’. Lareau (2003) theorised that although poor-working-class children’s skills and mentality are likely to work for them in their own environments, it is middle-class children’s that are more highly valued in school and employment settings. This aligns with the ideas of Bourdieu (1986), who argued that unequal educational outcomes can be explained by both a schooling system imbued with power inequalities where higher social classes control what is valued, as well as the differential transmission of resources (capital) and dispositions (habitus) through families that middle-class children tend to receive a greater ‘pay off’ for.

In this study, patterns of parenting similarly ‘worked’ to produce differential abilities and mentalities among children. In their parents employing ‘essential assistance’, the poor-working-class children’s education was primarily dependent upon their schooling. This is problematic in terms of children’s learning and development for three reasons: (1) a lack of parental intervention can mean that any stumbling blocks on the part of children at school (such as struggling with confidence) are less likely to be overcome (Crozier, 1997); (2) a discord between home and school life can mean that teachers have to spend time socialising children into the education system as well as teaching them the

curriculum (Evans, 2007); and (3) a high prevalence of learning and behavioural issues in schools (pre-, primary and secondary) that children from deprived backgrounds tend to attend can mean that the learning of children both with and without issues is hindered (Evans, 2007). By contrast, in employing concerted cultivation, middle-class parents are likely to get the ‘best’ out of their children academically and ensure their learning is not prohibited in any way. Their strategic involvement means that they tend to get their children into better schools and better positions within schools, and their stocks of resources enable them to address any issues and enhance their children’s education beyond the national curriculum (Ball, 2003; Devine, 2004). All of which provide middle-class children with the capacity and opportunity to do far better at school than their deprived counterparts.

In addition, and perhaps even more crucially, essential assistance and concerted cultivation appear to furnish poor-working-class and middle-class children with different educational and occupational ‘horizons’. Poor-working-class parents do not tend to give a great deal of thought to their children’s educational and occupational futures and often have no real belief that their children will go on to achieve their childhood aspirations of being veterinarians, forensic scientists, archaeologists and so forth. Thus, poor-working-class children are not guided or supported into occupations and are likely to struggle to transition into the labour market, which severely limits their horizons. Conversely, middle-class parents encourage their children to think about and talk about what they would like to be from a young age, have a real belief that their children can achieve any aspirations that they have, and support and guide them towards their desired destinations. This is likely to broaden middle-class children’s horizons and help them to make successful transitions into the labour market.

With regard to leisure, like in Lareau’s (2003) study, the findings presented here highlighted the differential pace and structure of family life associated with poor-working-class and middle-class patterns of parenting, which are likely to have consequences for children’s leisure tastes and biographies. It is probable that the autonomy poor-working-class children are afforded encourages creativity and spontaneity, but also opens up the potential for them to get into trouble, especially as they get older. They are also unlikely to acquire the skills or dispositions that make for diverse or lasting leisure biographies. There is strong evidence that childhood is the critical life stage for laying secure

foundations for long-term careers in sport (Birchwood et al., 2008), and this probably extends to many other leisure activities as well. Research also suggests that ‘family culture’ is crucial for disposing individuals to participate in sport and active leisure (Birchwood et al., 2008; Wheeler, 2011). Consequently, and by contrast to poor-working-class children, middle-class children’s busy and diverse leisure lives in which organised activities are a strong feature are likely to secure their future participation in a range of leisure pursuits. The middle-class children in this study, particularly those in ‘mid’ and ‘upper’ fractions, were actually already ‘cultural omnivores’ (Peterson and Kern, 1996) before the end of their primary schooling.

Conclusion

It is not unreasonable to suppose that most academics in the field of sociology, whether quantitative or qualitative researchers, would be in agreement that the family is a central site for the production and reproduction of class inequalities in education and leisure, though dispute the significance and nature of the family processes involved. What has been outlined in the present article are patterns of parenting linked to particular social classes that emerged out of 90 semi-structured interviews undertaken with a case study of families in the north-west of England. It has been suggested that poor-working-class and middle-class parents raise their children in very different ways in line with distinct mentalities and practices, conceptualised as ‘essential assistance’ and ‘concerted cultivation’ respectively. The former is a new conceptualisation suggested in this article, while the latter was originally coined by Lareau (2003). It is important to note here that the identification of two distinct classes and associated clusters of parenting is not to deny the existence of intra-class diversity, or variations related to gender, ethnicity or any other social division. There are important nuances to essential assistance and concerted cultivation, and this study has shown how the latter can be regarded as gradational in the sense that some middle-class fractions more intensively cultivate than others. However, the focus of this article has been *patterns* rather than *nuances*, which the findings presented here suggest are meaningful and worthy of further study.

Overall, what this article has revealed is two very different world views and experiences. Poor-working-class parents have particular assumptions about child development and expectations for what their children are able to achieve in life, which means that their involvement and investment correspond with children who demonstrate ability and/or effort. It is not, as the media can portray (in, for example, television programmes such as Channel 5's 'Benefits Britain: Life of the Dole'), that parents raising children in poverty do not care about their education. What the findings presented in this article suggest is that poor-working-class families exist in something of a poverty trap, whereby they have little ability and dare not aspire in some cases to change their lives, and it is probable that this has contributed to the polarisation and fragmentation of social class in contemporary Britain (Savage et al., 2013). As Walkerdine et al. (2001, p.68) have observed, 'people who cannot imagine things being different, cannot at least fantasise something else, cannot reinvent themselves'. Conversely, the social world of middle-class families is busy and competitive and parents actively look to 'reinvent' themselves and their children in the changing British post-modern society through their strategic and often intensive involvement. The findings of this study would suggest, in fact, that the increasingly intensive social reproduction among the middle-class is closing off opportunities for reinvention among the poor-working-class, which is likely to be further dividing the rich from the poor.

Notes

1. Poor-working-class is used to denote the families at the bottom of the social class spectrum in this study. Others might use precariat, socially excluded, lower-class or even under-class as a label for this group, as they mostly survived on benefits, resided in distinct localities and experienced multiple forms of deprivation. As other academics have observed, they are a section of our society who have struggled to 'reinvent' themselves in the labour market following the disappearance of traditional working-class jobs from the 1970s (Roberts, 2001; Walkerdine et al., 2001).

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